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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000023

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SUBJECT: HUGE MOSQUE PROJECT FACES STIFF OPPOSITION

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) SUMMARY: For several months, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's vision of building the third largest mosque in the world has divided the government and broader public here, provoking opposition from all sectors of society. Given a potential price tag that runs in excess of USD one billion, many Algerians vehemently object to a willingness to spend such money on a religious symbol while their daily lives remain difficult and painfully free from similar government attention. Our contacts have told us that opposition from within the military and security services, who are reluctant to appease Islamists with such a powerful religious symbol, has forced numerous high-profile delays in awarding the design and technical contracts. The mosque, now a symbol of a government perceived to be out of touch with the needs of its people, remains a grandiose design on paper alone, in the hands of a presidency uncertain of how to proceed and a president who needs to get the security services themselves to sign off on his vision. END SUMMARY.

A MONUMENT TO RELIGION... OR TO A PRESIDENT?  
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12. (U) According to the official communique of the Ministry of Religious Affairs on February 7, 2006, the Grand Mosque of Algiers is a construction project initiated by Bouteflika and designed to be the third largest in the world, after mosques in Mecca and Medina. The communique stated that construction would begin in 2007 so that the mosque would be completed by 2009, together with Bouteflika's grand infrastructure project, the East-West Highway. The latest public deadline for the government to award the design and technical contracts for the mosque was the 27th day of Ramadan, in the middle of October 2007. The deadline was publicized in the press for days, but the day came and went in silence, the latest in a cycle of hype and missed deadlines. Press reports on that day featured only general information that Bouteflika intended the mosque design to represent the five pillars of Islam, and that the minaret would "touch the stars." To this date, no final design, architect or contractor has been selected.

13. (C) Hadj Zoubir, a prominent colonel in the Algerian military (strictly protect source), told us privately on November 16 of his "complete refusal to have a mosque built to satisfy the needs of a leader and which will be considered as another gift to Islamists." Ali Djerri, then editor of Algeria's largest newspaper, El Khabar, and a man with good

contacts in the security services, told Ambassador in early December that the project carried huge security risks. Djerri understood from his contacts that the mosque could host as many as 100,000 worshippers. He said many in the security services wonder what they would do if these 100,000 decided to march en masse from the mosque to nearby downtown Algiers.

¶4. (C) On November 24, Minister of Religious Affairs Bouabdallah Ghoullammellah officially denied that the project was frozen, but confirmed the government would organize a special session to study the mosque issue. Rabah Abdellah, a journalist at French-language daily Le Soir d'Algerie, said that an official reaction was inevitable, but "you have to know that the Ministry of Religious Affairs is out of the game, and that the Presidency is in charge of the issue." According to Abdellah, Bouteflika's trusted private secretary, Moulay Guendil, is now the one responsible for dealing with the mosque project.

HOW MUCH ISLAM IS TOO MUCH?

¶5. (C) Algeria, asserted Colonel Zoubir, cannot afford again to play the game of taming political Islam. "It is an illusion to think that it is possible," Zoubir stated, "and building such a mosque will definitely send the wrong message." Fodil Boumala, a freelance journalist for French-language l'Expression and state-run ENTV television, shared the same opinion with us on December 13. On November 22, journalist Abdellah told us that the mosque project was unlikely to move forward due to internal opposition. Abdellah said his source at the Presidency told him that "one should be careful with such a project," saying the government

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was planning to establish a special council to deal with the issue, and that in all likelihood the project would be placed in the freezer. Abdellah, together with Nadia Mellal, recently resigned from French-language daily Liberte, referred to official government estimates of a price tag ranging from one to three billion USD. "Do you think Algerians who have problems buying basic foodstuffs can understand this expense?" asked Abdellah. Boumala told us that Bouteflika's "megalomania" should not be the motive for such a "Pharaonic" project, when he said that more than 3000 housing units could be constructed with a similar amount of money. Referring to the economic hardship of the Algerian people, Boumala said that many feel it "indecent" to think in terms of such prosperity and extravagance. "Algeria deserves better symbols," Boumala said.

A GRAND VISION... IN JUST THREE PAGES

¶6. (C) Prominent Algerian architect Mohamed Larbi Merhoum (protect), who bid for the technical study of the grand mosque, told us on November 22 that the whole project had a troubled birth. According to Merhoum, the tender was not clear at all, and was only three pages long, "completely unbelievable for a project of such a dimension." Merhoum said that the tender to design and build a standard hospital in Algeria, by contrast, usually runs to 100 pages. Merhoum said he wrote a letter to the president in which he asserted that one "could not be rejected if the project in itself was not well-defined." He did not receive an answer, but speculated that had his letter come from a major international architect, "Bouteflika's ego would have driven him to have a foreign firm take the lead on the project." Bouteflika, Merhoum concluded, simply "wanted prestige as usual," and was also competing with the Grand Mosque the Moroccans built in Casablanca.

COMMENT: BOUTEFLIKA'S LIMITS

¶7. (C) For a population currently troubled by terrorist attacks and the rising prices of basic foodstuffs, the mosque issue has become a lightning rod for controversy. Our contacts tell us that what little money Algerians have is, they feel, being wasted by the government. Bouteflika, they say, failed to reassure the population by remaining silent after the December 11 terror attacks in Algiers, creating the sense that he is out of touch with the reality of their daily lives. Opposition has been strong enough to force a government wary of upsetting the population and the security services to hold the grandiose project on the drawing board. If our sources' interpretation is correct, the mosque's future depends on the Presidency and the security services reaching a consensus. This reminds us of the tenuous balance between the two institutions on other security-related issues, such as the naming of a successor to the former director of internal security, General Smain Lamari.

FORD